WOMEN AND POWER IN THE OJIBWA FICTION

Oana-Andreea Ghiţă-Pîrnuţă
Senior Lecturer, PhD, „Transilvania" University of Braşov

Abstract: This paper examines the theme of women's power in Louise Erdrich's "The Antelope Wife" focusing on how women display their affection, maternal care and physical attractiveness. Through complex and engaging characters, the novel provides deep insight into the essential role women play within the Ojibwa tribal community. Maternal care is a central theme in the novel where women are presented as devoted and dedicated to the care and protection of their children. They assume the responsibility of providing them with love, confort and safety, being always concerned with the well-being and happiness of the family. The women of the novel are strong in different ways and manifestations. They demonstrate resilience and inner strength in the face of challenges and adversity. The paper highlights the importance and contribution of women to the cohesion and prosperity of the tribal community, providing a deep insight into the diversity and complexity of their roles.

Keywords: traditional values, resilience, feminine strength, female agency, motherhood, empowerment, leadership.

Louise Erdrich can be considered a new bright light in the Native American literature. She is a bold writer, she uses modern narrative techniques breaking new narratological ground. Erdrich is a "stunningly effective stylist and a woman who courageously confronts the realities of Native American life in the twentieth century" (Beidler & Barton, 2006:3).

Louise Erdrich is a female writer of mixed blood and cultural heritage: "Erdrich's Ojibwa and French grandparents on her mother's side of the fanmily lived on North Dakota's Turtle Mountain Reservation where her grandfather Patrick Gourneau served as tribal chair" (Stookey, 1999:2).

In Louise Erdrich's novel entitled *The Antelope Wife*, the dynamics of power among women emerges as a central theme, intricately intertwined with the rich Native American culture and heritage. Moving along the urban landscape of Minneapolis to the ancestral grounds of the Ojibwa reservation in North Dakota, the narrative offers details through the lives of diverse characters across multiple generations, highlighting the flexibility, support and complexities of the female experience within matriarchal structures.

The multilayered roles of women are divided within the narrative, tracing their paths of personal growth, familial bonds and cultural identity. Against a background marked by both physical and metaphorical aspects, the women present in the novel live in a land marked by tradition, modernity and the enduring spirit of womanhood.

The female agency and power dynamics are examined by the choices, challenges and triumphs of the women who inhabit Erdrich's fictional realm. By delving into their individual stories, we aim to shed light on the complexity of relationships, traditions and aspirations that shape their lives and the lives of those around them.

Sweetheart Calico, Mathilda and Rozin are only some of the important female characters in *The Antelope Wife*. Rozin is strong and determined carrying the history of her family with her. She faces tough times but keeps going because of her love for her family. Cally is independent and determined. She faces her problems with grace under pressure and works hard to make a better life for herself and her family.

According to Laura Klein and Lilian Ackerman, silence surrounds the lives of Native American women and this silence "has concealed the roles of Native women in the thicket of

ethnographic literature. The wives, sisters, and mothers of the Native nations do appear in traditional ethnographies but only where they are expected, and the meanings of their lives are left to the readers' imaginations. We never hear their voices and are never told their tales. The readers, then, write into this quiet their own cultural expectations for the 'natural' role of women. As seen by non-Native readers, the image of American Indian women becomes a reflection of self, according to the standards of the times" (Ackerman & Klein, 2000:3).

Through an in-depth analysis and reflection, it is important for us to understand how these women assert their autonomy, negotiate their roles within familial and societal structures and carve out paths of within the complexities of their existence. By engaging ourselves in their narratives, the hope is to gain visions into the unique ways which women live the power dynamics, forge connections and promote a sense of identity and belonging in a world that is at once familiar.

The women belonging to the Ojibwa Native American cultural group are an important part of the story in the novel *The Antelope Wife* by Louise Erdrich. They are described as strong and wise individuals who love and support their families and communities. These women have a deep respect for nature and believe in the power and wisdom of their ancestors. Ojibwa women are leaders in their own ways. They take important decisions for the tribal community and are always there to offer advice and guidance to those around them. They guide their lives according to ancient ceremonies and rituals, traditions and teachings, which makes them a source of confidence and stability for those around them.

Spirituality also plays a central role in the lives of Ojibwa women. They connect deeply with the natural world and believe they are in harmony with the earth, water and sky. Through traditional ceremonies and rituals, they express their faith and respect for their connections to the universe. For example, the quote "The women in my family are the kind to argue with the spirits. Short, tough-minded, sinuous of thought and bold, we daughters of the granddaughters of Blue Prairie Woman are wavy haired and lightened by the Roy blood. We're twins of twins, going back through the floating lines of time. Descended of the three–fires people and of an Ivory Coast slave..." (Erdrich, 2002:34-35) suggests that the women in the family are not passive recipients of fate but actively engage with the spiritual realm. They are depicted as assertive and unafraid to challenge the forces that shape their lives. These descriptions paint a picture of the Native American women who are physically and mentally resilient. They possess a combination of strength, intelligence, and courage. It also highlights the family's Native American heritage, tracing their lineage back to Blue Prairie Woman. The fact that the "Roy blood"is mentioned suggests a mixed ancestry, indicating the complexity of their identity.

In *The Antelope Wife* by Louise Erdrich, the women in the story are often described as attractive to men in various ways. This attraction can be influenced by several factors, including physical beauty, but also their inner characteristics, such as their wisdom, strength and grace. The physical beauty of Roman women is often described by delicate features, expressive eyes, or long hair. These aspects contribute to their charm and attitude.

In the quote "Later, she was the very same mother. Calmer. Irritable. But in the old familiar ways (...) Our grandmothers were both round-shouldered powerful small women with eyes of deep brown sunk narrow in their faces. Their hands were tough and splayed, but delicate" (Erdrich, 2002:55), the phrase "round-shouldered powerful small women" implies a compact and solid physique, which can often be associated with attractiveness, especially when combined with strength. Additionally, describing their eyes as "deep brown sunk narrow in their faces" evokes a sense of intensity and depth, qualities that can be alluring. Like any person, she experiences a range of feelings, emotions and moods, but these fluctuations occur within the framework of her familiar maternal role within family.

Their charming personality and inner strength captivate the men around them and make them admire and respect them. The quote ”I only want to be with her, or be dead. You wouldn’t think a man as ordinary as myself could win a woman who turns the heads of others in the streets. Yet there are circumstances and daughters that do prevail and certain ways” (Erdrich, 2002:22) conveys the speaker’s deep and singular devotion to the woman in question. It reflects the all-encompassing nature of his love, suggesting that life without her would be unbearable. Klaus self-perception as ”ordinary” adds a layer of humility to his declaration of love. Despite seeing himself as unremarkable, he is captivated by a woman who seemingly commands attention wherever she goes. It paints a vivid picture of the woman’s magnetism. It suggests that she possesses a beauty and charisma that captivates those around her, making the speaker’s affection for her more remarkable, but it also shows that love can defy societal expectations and conventions.

Women in the novel are often depicted as strong within, with extraordinary resilience and fighting spirit. They face challenges and difficulties with courage and determination, managing to face adversity and maintain their integrity and dignity despite it. They are often portrayed as wise and intuitive, having a deep understanding of the world and people around them. They are sources of wisdom and advice for those in their community. Rozin’s actions demonstrate her strength in facing grief rather than shying away from it: ”Rozin. She swam in the grief, she cooked with it, she bagged it up and froze it. She made a stew, burned it out in the backyard, dug a hole and threw it in, sacked it for garbage, put it up on a shelf, brought it to the trees she loved, and set it free out in the leaves. She worshiped it, curled around it like a sweet dog, smoothed the hair of her remaining daughter underneath her hand, and decided to have nothing to do with men. Rozin left her husband and her lover both behind” (Erdrich, 2002:84). By ”swimming in the grief” and ”cooking with it”, she confronts her pain directly, refusing to be overwhelmed by it. Rather than allowing her sorrow to consume her, she takes proactive steps to cope with it. It highlights her self-sufficiency emphasizing her ability to take decisions that are in her own best interests, regardless of societal expectations or any conventions.

The women in *The Antelope Wife* often show their affection by protecting their loved ones. They are concerned with the well-being of their families and devote their time and energy to helping and protecting those around them in the face of hardships and dangers. We can see the sacrifices and renunciation of their own needs in favor of those of the others. They also show their affection through gestures of tenderness and physical affection, such as: hugs, kisses and caresses. These simple and heartfelt gestures are powerful ways to express love and attachment to your loved ones. For example, we can see this in the part when Cally’s mother takes care of Frank: ”She holds his shoulder, puts her arm around him, and holds him lovingly, the way I cannot ever remember her holding my father. The way she acts is so different, so natural, so real, so warm and naked that I suddenly have this picture of what has just happened to her” (Erdrich, 2002:147).

We see the genuine and natural way in which Rozin expresses her love. This observation leads Cally to reflect on the contrasting dynamics of affection within their own family, particularly between their mother and father. The descriptions express a sense of intimacy, authenticity, and vulnerability in the woman’s gesture, highlighting the depth of her affection and the genuineness of her emotions. Linking this observation to the way women show affection, it underscores the idea that women may express love and warmth in multifarious ways.

The mother’s care and her protective instinct are presented as central to the character and actions of many of the female characters in the novel. These aspects are highlighted in different contexts and situations within the story, emphasizing the importance of family relationships and maternal responsibility.

The mothers in *The Antelope Wife* are often portrayed as devoted to the care and protection of their children. They assume the role of providing them with love, comfort and safety, and caring for their well-being and happiness represent constant priorities in their lives. They are ready to do whatever it takes to protect their loved ones from the dangers and threats of the outside world, regardless of the personal sacrifices this entails. This is shown in the part where Cally is ill, suffers and calls her mother. Rozin is there and she is taking good care of her: ”An hour passes, and then she pours a little ginger ale into a cup and sits down, careful not to jostle Cally. She feeds her daughter teaspoon by teaspoon, waiting for each spoonful to settle. Cally’s lips are dry. Rozin puts a bit of Vaseline on her finger, rubs their deep and punished color” (Erdrich, 2002:87). It illustrates the tender care and devotion of a mother, Rozin, towards her daughter, Cally, during a moment of vulnerability. The act of Rozin pouring ginger ale into a cup and feeding Cally teaspoon by teaspoon showcases the meticulous attention and nurturing instinct of a mother. It reflects Rozin’s dedication to ensuring her daughter’s comfort and well-being, even in small gestures. This quote portrays a touching moment of maternal love and tenderness, illustrating the profound bond between Rozin and Cally. It captures the essence of maternal instinct and compassion as well as the resilience and strength of a mother in caring for her child during times of adversity.

We can also observe the way in which the woman is viewed from the point of view of the brothers, as a sister: ”My sister, I miss her so bad. She went before me, broke ground for me, tested my mother’s body. Then she made a path for me to the next world, left her footsteps for my shoes” (Erdrich, 2002:110). This quote reflects the deep bond between siblings, particularly sisters, and the profound impact they have on each other’s lives. It suggests that the older sister paved the way for the speaker’s existence, both physically and metaphorically from the first moments of life, when being in the mother’s womb. The image of the sister ”making a path” and ”leaving footsteps” reflects her role as a guide. She has already experienced the challenges of life, leaving behind a roadmap for the speaker to follow and learn from.

In conclusion, the novel entitled *The Antelope Wife* emphasizes the importance and diversity of women’s roles in the community of the Ojibwa cultural group. Through gestures of affection, maternal care and their powerful influence, women are presented as central pillars in the cohesion and prosperity of these communities. Their resilience adds depth and complexity to their portrait highlighting their profound impact on tribal life and human relationships. Thus, the present analysis shows the essential role and influence of women in preserving the traditions and cultural values of the Ojibwa cultural group.

Women are strong: ”sometimes they are so powerful that they can change the course of the world. Often, once they take a stand, they change their own lives and the lives of those around them” (Hazen-Hammond, 1999:2).

Power is manifested in multifarious ways: through cosmology, economic control and hierarchy. Power is repatterned in the Native American context through the life lived by the Native American women and by society.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ackerman, Lilian A. & Klein, Laura F. (2000) *Women and Power in Native North America*. University of Oklahoma Press

Beidler, Peter G. & Barton, Gay (2006) *A Reader’s Guide to the Novels of Louise Erdrich*. Revised and Expanded Edition. Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press

Erdrich, L. (2002) *The Antelope Wife*. Flamingo

Hazen-Hammond, Susan (1999) *Spider Woman’s Web: Traditional Native American Tales About Women’s Power*. Penguin Publishing

Stookey, Lorena L. (1999) *Louise Erdrich: A Critical Companion*. Greenwood